

Expanded Work-Crew Program a Success at Branchville Correctional Facility

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"The public is seeing men giving back to society. "They do good work."

Steve Lemen,

DNR Project Manager at O'Bannon Woods



The stout men in brown uniforms clear saplings and tall weeds from a wooded roadside. Sweat beads roll down their brows onto already-damp shirts.

Watching nearby, [O'Bannon Woods State Park's](#) assistant property manager gushes words of gratitude: for the laborers, their supervisors in Perry County and state leaders whose actions have freed more men

to tackle projects on public properties. But freedom may not be the best word to use, since the workers are [Branchville Correctional Facility](#) offenders.

But their sweat, Bob Sawtelle swears, is "carving out our park from the woods. Without them, most of this work wouldn't get done."

The work Sawtelle refers to includes clearing vegetation from roadsides and cutting back saplings and small trees from the Indiana bank of the Ohio River. Men working for the Civilian Conservation Corps more than 60 years ago did much of the same work on state land: blazing trails and stacking rocks to stop erosion. Today, offender work crews do the job.

An initiative of Indiana Department of Correction Commissioner J. David Donahue has boosted the numbers of Hoosier offenders staffing work crews. At Branchville, new teams of workers have been assigned to O'Bannon Woods, Lincoln State Park and Patoka Lake.

Unlike traditional offender crews that are supervised by correctional officers, the new teams are placed in the care of state workers. The Department of Correction provides training and support, but other state employees pick up and return offenders to the facility each day.

The initiative created concern among some lawmakers. Among them was State Sen. Richard Young, who in a guest column published in The News, voiced concern that DNR and state-transportation employees shouldn't be responsible for overseeing prisoners. But Sawtelle said problems have been all but nonexistent and concerns from the public about the additional offenders are rare. He calls the men tackling labor-intensive projects "an invaluable asset to our park."

Branchville crews have tackled local community projects for more than 20 years, but the number of offenders allowed outside the prison's gates shrank over time. In a recent meeting, Branchville Superintendent Rich Clark said offenders allowed to join work crews under the expanded program are still carefully screened. Taken into consideration, he said, are the crimes they were convicted of and their behavior since being incarcerated.

Sawtelle said he and other male employees of the state forest have completed Department of Correction training, allowing them to supervise the crews. Training included instruction on working with offenders and practical skills such as CPR and first-aid.

So far, the expanded work-crew program has run smoothly, Clark said.

DNR Project Manager Steve Lemen, at O'Bannon Woods Monday, agreed. "The public is seeing men giving back to society," he said. "They do good work."

Sawtelle, who has worked with offender work crews for more than two decades as a DNR employee, said the projects completed by men from Branchville in just the first three months of the expanded

program have generated a flow of compliments from park visitors, sometimes more than a dozen words of praise each week.

Most days, O'Bannon Woods road crew supervisor Andrew Shirmeyer makes the 40-minute drive to Branchville to pick up and drop off offenders. His work team now numbers five, but will eventually grow to 10 men.

Though offenders are assigned jobs to be done, they work hard as a team and value the work they do," Shirmeyer said. "These guys work very hard and they take pride in their work. They also find a little friendly competition with the other road crew."

The other crew of Branchville offenders is supervised by a correctional officer and does much of the same work as the new team assigned to O'Bannon Woods. The old crew works at several DNR properties, but when it's not working somewhere else, O'Bannon Woods is its home. Members of the two teams vie in friendly competition to outdo one another, Sawtelle said.

There's plenty to do. O'Bannon Woods is less than a year old, but is tied to the expansive Harrison-Crawford State Forest system. Sawtelle said the five full-time employees are responsible for a trail system nearly 200 miles in length and 25 miles of paved roadways.

Without offender workers, much of the labor-intensive efforts wouldn't get done.

Monday's work of clearing vegetation from roadsides makes the state park look more appealing to visitors, many of whom come with horse trailers. "When they can drive down a road and limbs aren't scratching their expensive trailers, you know they appreciate that," Sawtelle said.

Signs identify areas in which offenders are working. Complaints haven't arisen, but the park's policy is to move to another area if a visitor objects to the presence of offenders, Sawtelle said. The same policy is followed when DNR's own employees are working in an area.

Crew supervisors try to work in areas and at times that limit contact with the public. For example, campgrounds are cleaned early in the week, not on Fridays when visitors begin to arrive in greater numbers.

The offenders, themselves, appreciate the opportunity to leave the correctional facility.

Dustin Ellinger, a muscular 31-year-old admits he was skeptical when he left his previous assignment in Branchville's recreation department to join the road crew. "But now I look forward to the work we do. I get up every morning ready to go."

Other work-crew members called for Ellinger's help in pulling a grape vine that had entwined itself onto a tree. Five men grabbed hold of the vine and pulled. It quickly snapped and Ellinger went back to his

shears and continued remove small saplings.

Darren Ridenour, in his second week on the longtime crew, will be released by Christmas. Life on the work crew, he said, has bettered his work ethic and has prepared him to rejoin the work force. "I'll be more ready for the real world," he said.

About The Department of Correction

The Department employs over 8,000 employees and houses 24,000 adult and juveniles in 32 facilities, ranging from minimum to maximum custody, prison camps, juvenile facilities and work release centers. The Department's home page on the Internet can be found at: <http://www.in.gov/indcorrection>. The Department's Re-entry Site can be found: <http://www.reentry.in.gov>.